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CONTACT: ~~Janet Hansen~~ Amy Greenman
212/698-~~4489~~
7087

FRAGMENTS OF THE ARK

Louise Meriwether

Yankee troops arrived at Beaufort the next day...The slaves greeting them were jubilant, And they kept on coming, deserting the plantations...fording the river on rafts and barges, flatboats and canoes. On one day alone, six thousand arrived, journeying to meet the Yankee soldiers, journeying to freedom...The river was black on black as they continued to tumble out of it, singing in their strong Gullah voices: "Been in the storm so long, Lord; been in the storm so long."

Liz Hartman, Director of Publicity, Pocket Books
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020 (212) 698-7086

Louise Meriwether, author of *DADDY WAS A NUMBER RUNNER*, an immense critical and popular success, has turned her powerful talents to the story of Peter Mango, a slave from South Carolina whose struggle reflected the quest of every black man, woman and child in America: freedom, dignity and the right to live a self-determined life equally under law. **FRAGMENTS OF THE ARK** is the story of one man's struggle as well as a vivid panorama of a nation at war with itself over basic human rights. Based on the true story of the slave Robert Smalls, who did indeed deliver a captured gunboat to the Union Navy, this novel is at once a moving personal history and the sweeping saga of a nation rent asunder by war.

In 1861, the Civil War was well underway. The abolitionist John Brown had been hanged for his reprisal for the bloody sacking of Lawrence by a band of pro-slavers. Charleston was under blockade by the Northern forces and was fighting for its old way of life: plantation living, cotton selling, and slavery. If Port Royal Harbor fell to the Union, Charleston would be isolated; no longer could British clippers smuggle in supplies and ammunition to the Confederates. Desperate, the Rebel forces impressed every able-bodied hand, slaves included, to aid in the struggle, and thus it was that the slave Peter Mango, Lily Mango's son from Beaufort, owned by Roland Caine, came to pilot the *Swanee*.

The *Swanee* was a whore, the fastest paddlewheel steamer sailing the inland waterways, who had sold herself body and soul to the Confederates. A 24-pound howitzer mounted on her fantail and a 32-pounder on her bow had converted her from a trading vessel carting

rice and cotton down the Wappoo Creek into a military lady capable of transporting a thousand troops. Peter loved the steamer, though he despised working for the Confederates.

Peter Mango also loved, with a love as deep and wide as his being, his pregnant wife, Rain, and their little girl Glory. Rain was the slave of a banker, Kenneth Rodman, who had already transported her first child, Zee, to a nursery farm to be sold to the highest bidder. All Rain asked for was freedom, for herself and her children. All Peter wanted was to give it to her.

Out of this quest comes a daring plot, one that will thrust Peter Mango into the pages of history, and win him all that he desires. With a rag-tag crew of slaves, and their families smuggled aboard, Peter Mango steals the *Swanee* and delivers her to the Union forces.

The logbook was open in its little niche on the shelf. July had been assigned the task of officially recording their journey to freedom and slowly in his almost illegible hand he penned, "Two A.M. We casts off." Other black hands hauled up the anchor, shoveled coal into the furnaces, checked the steam gauges. Black eyes searched the the sky to find the North Star, guiding light throughout the ages. Please, do not wink us into oblivion.

With this bold act, the journey — that began with his ancestors, stolen from their native lands and sold into slavery — ends on the Yankee frigate as Peter Mango hands over the *Swanee*. Free at last: Peter Mango, Rain and their children are no longer slaves. With freedom comes responsibility, and Peter

commits himself to the cause, serving in the Union Navy,
advising the tactical warfare of the Northern troops, meeting
Abraham Lincoln, even serving as an elected official.

Louise Meriwether captures some of this country's most
profound memories and deepest agonies in an unforgettable
story of the human spirit seeking to rise above prejudice and
bigotry to find redemption in the embrace of love.

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Paramount Publishing Consumer Group
1270 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020
212-698-7000

Louise Meriwether
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IN THE AUTHOR'S OWN WORDS

I have been dancing with this novel, **FRAGMENTS OF THE ARK** for a long, long time. Fact is, I had a contract to write it in 1970. And I tried. I waltzed with it. And tangoed. And jitterbugged. All to no avail. The book overwhelmed me and I snarled to myself, "Who said I had to write the damn thing in the first place? There's no God aimed at my head threatening me." So I changed the contract, wrote a modern book instead. But after sending it out to my agent and after a few rejections I hauled it back to my bosom, to my agent's disgust. "I could sell it," she pleaded, but I was adamant. I no longer wanted my name attached to the abortive thing.

And so I tried my hand at this book again. It's a civil war novel based upon the true exploits of Robert Smalls, a slave, born in the Sea Islands who grew to manhood in Charleston. During the Civil War he was the pilot of a Confederate gunboat. My story is about Smalls (whose name has been changed to Peter Mango), his love affair with his wife, his wartime exploits, and what happens to him and the other members of his crew.

So I tried once to write this book, and again a second time,



immersing myself in history books up to my eyeballs. I read eyewitness accounts of the war, and the official volumes published by our government, and the diaries of plantation owners, and the narratives of the slaves themselves. And for the second time, my teeth falling out by now, and my hair coming out in chunks, I was dancing a macabre, lonely step all by myself.

Again I abandoned the project. But it would not leave me alone. Unfortunately, I had written a children's book about Robert Smalls, and had promised myself then, doing research for that book, that I would one day write an adult novel about those extraordinary times in our nation's history. The interesting thing about our country is that extraordinary times produce extraordinary people. Abraham Lincoln, Thaddeus Stevens, Charles Sumner, Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, Tecumseh Sherman, and slaves themselves who were eloquent spokesmen and activists: Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman. And there were so many unsung heroes and heroines on both sides of the fence; men like Robert Smalls.

Perhaps my fascination with him might have been because Charleston and its environs are my ancestral home. And like Robert Smalls, my grandfather was born into slavery and was also a seaman, the captain of a fishing boat with a crew of eight. When my grandfather was an infant, during the Civil War, his parents and others were trying to escape to freedom in a rowboat across Confederate lines to the Union side. The baby started to cry, endangering everyone's life. The leader of the rowboat ordered the infant's mother to throw the child overboard. Instead, instinctively,

frantically, she started to nurse the child, who hushed his crying. Fortunately, for my father had a right to be born from the seed of that infant who grew up to be a seaman and my grandfather.

And so I tackled this novel yet again, for the third time, resigned now to my fate, as I trotted back and forth to Charleston and the Sea Islands; it was either write this book or write nothing. And once I made up my mind that I had no other alternative, that I had to write this monkey off my back, nice things started to happen.

While I was writing the children's book on Robert Smalls, I journeyed to Toledo, Ohio to interview his eighty-odd year old son, who took sick immediately upon my arrival, was hospitalized and died. I also, for the children's book, interviewed two of Robert Small's oldest grandchildren. Now, for the adult novel, I located Robert's two youngest grandchildren — all of the others in this interval had gone on to their maker. These last two were quite helpful, giving me the key to unlock the secret of Robert Smalls' wife, for this book is also a powerful love story.

Somewhere along the way I decided that since my main man was a seaman I should go out on a boat into Charleston Harbor, a before dawn sail on a boat which fished for shrimp. As I stood in the port waiting to board, I realized that this port was the very same one that my grandfather had used. My grandfather, the infant who had almost perished escaping to freedom. My grandfather, the captain of a fishing craft which was chopped to pieces by a cutter during a storm. All of the crew drowned, their bodies never recovered from the man-eating sea.

I also visited Beaufort, which was Robert Smalls' birthplace. A friend met me at the bus station. "I must find out where Robert Smalls is buried," I said to her. She replied, "No problem. He's buried in my church's courtyard." Ask and it shall be given. I went to the church cemetery, studied Robert Smalls' grave, buried between his two wives, took off my shoes and wiggled my toes in the cemetery grass. "Help me, Robert Smalls, I prayed. I'm in way over my head."

I guess he did help me because the novel is finally finished. It's as if when you say "yes" to the universe it answers with a resounding "well all right, then."

I named this book **FRAGMENTS OF THE ARK** because I believe that all of us, all of mankind, are children of God and therefore one. Unfortunately, we do not yet recognize our unity, and so we are in this boat, this ark, beating each other over the head with the oars, slaughtering one another instead of rowing together in harmony to safety. When we recognize our unity we will be whole. Until then we are fragments.

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